Nations and Nationalism **6** (1), 2000, 23–42. © *ASEN 2000*

Imperial versus national discourse: the case of Russia

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ABSTRACT. It is inaccurate and misleading to apply the term 'nationalism' to Russia prior to the present day. Both Tsarist and Soviet leaders sought to maintain an empire and not a nation-state, and their national consciousness was imperial rather than national. The lack of Russian nationalism was crucial for Russian history since it explains the failure of both Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union. Modern societies cannot be successfully constructed upon the basis of imperial thinking. The absence of Russian nationalism also has significance for nationalism theory. Russia possessed the social, political and cultural characteristics that have been adduced as 'causes' of nationalism by a wide variety of scholars, yet Russia failed to develop a nationalist movement. This suggests that what is crucial to modern nationalism is the appearance of a particularist, secular ideology, since the most notable aspect in which Russia differed from Europe was Russia's universalistic, religious and imperialist discourse of national identity.

In its national consciousness, as in many another aspect of its civilisation, Russia is a special case. It is inaccurate and misleading to use the terms 'nationalist' and 'nationalism', in their generally accepted meanings, to refer to individuals and movements in Russian history before the present day. Although it is a commonplace among historians of Russia that Russia was an empire and not a nation-state, no one has considered the relevance that this might have had for the quality of Russian national consciousness. The term 'Russian nationalism' has been carelessly used to apply to a style of thought that is in fact 'imperialism', thus obscuring the profound differences between European and Russian national consciousness. Nor is this a mere semantic quibble. That Russians expressed their national consciousness through the discourse of imperialism rather than the discourse of nationalism has far reaching implications for both Russian history and nationalism theory.

First, the absence of Russian nationalism helps explain the course of Russian history in the twentieth century. *Lack* of nationalism provides the

I thank A. E. Bothwell, Greg Gaut, Barbara Handy-Marchello and James Mochoruk for many fruitful discussions of nationalism and imperialism. I very much appreciate the comments and criticism of *Nations and Nationalism*'s anonymous reviewers.

most compelling explanation for the collapse of the tsarist autocracy, while the *presence* of Russian nationalism played the key role in the collapse of the Soviet Union. Second, and most important for the readers of this journal, the failure of nationalism to develop in Russia casts new light on our understanding of the origins and preconditions of nationalist movements. After all, Russians are a European people who make up a large homogenous population, who have inhabited a clearly defined homeland for more than a millennium, who have professed a common religion for 800 years, who speak a common language, who have fought many times against foreign enemies, and who have experienced economic and social modernisation that has gradually accelerated over the last 300 years. No scholar of European nationalism could fail to be astounded that a people with such characteristics did not experience nationalism.

What the Russian experience suggests is that historic ethnic cores, warfare among territorial states, or modern social and economic structures are not, in themselves, sufficient to produce nationalist movements. I will argue that Russians were unable to develop a nationalist movement because their discursive universe did not include the concepts that are essential to nationalist thought. Until well after the Second World War, Russian political and intellectual elites organised their understanding of the world according to a conceptual apparatus that had more in common with the universal, absolute religious categories of medieval Christendom than with the particularist, relative and secular categories of modern Europe. This suggests that the underlying foundation of nationalism is not constituted by material features of social, political or economic structure or by 'authentic' ethnicity, but by Europe's modern discursive domain.

The absence of nationalism from Russian history

The most concise and widely accepted definition of nationalism comes from the late Ernest Gellner:

> Nationalism is primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent ... Nationalist *sentiment* is the feeling of anger aroused by the violation of the principle, or the feeling of satisfaction aroused by its fulfilment. A nationalist *movement* is one actuated by a sentiment of this kind. (Gellner 1983: 1)

In other words, nationalism is a political demand, and what it demands is the creation of a nation-state. Although there are a wide variety of theories as to the origins of the nationalist demand, the field of nationalism studies universally accepts this basic definition (see, e.g., Hobsbawm 1990: 9; Smith 1971: 171; Kohn 1965: 9; Hayes 1950: 288; Minogue 1967: 25; Hinsley 1973, 11).

According to this definition, there are three ways in which nationalist

demands can be stimulated: (1) the political boundary of the state might not include all members of the nation (and the boundaries must therefore be extended); (2) the nation might be ruled by an alien group (and it must be replaced with conationals); or (3) the political boundary of the state might include members of another nation (and non-nationals must be evicted or assimilated).

Thus, in order for there to be a Russian nationalism, one of these principles would have to be violated and Russians would have to seek to redress that violation. The first case obviously does not apply; the Russian empire was a state that already included the ethnic Great Russian population. We can also dismiss the second possibility; it is true that some ultra-Russian chauvinists in the early twentieth century believed that Nicholas II's regime served the interests of Germany, but this is rather a different question from the resentment of one ethnic group being ruled by another. Moreover, in reality, the tsarist autocracy represented no ethnicity whatsoever, but only its own state power.

It is the third possibility that is applicable to Russia: the Russian nation was only one (albeit the largest) of many nations contained within the Russian state. Russian nationalist resentment at this state of affairs could be manifested in two forms: either the Russian nation could draw a boundary around the territory in which Russians lived, and separate itself from all non-Russian territories, or it could seek to turn all the residents of the Russian state into members of the Russian nation. The first alternative would mean to disband the empire and to create a Russia of, by, and for its people. The second would mean the thorough enculturation with Russian ethnicity (Russification) of all peoples of the state. However, it is widely recognised that neither of these alternatives was pursued by any of Russia's political or intellectual elites prior to the present day. Because they all sought to retain the historic Russian state in its imperial form, Russia's political and intellectual elite were not nationalists but *imperialists*.

This is most easily shown in the case of the tsarist autocracy. Russian tsars did, of course, attempt to use national themes to bolster their legitimacy. However, no tsar showed an interest in creating a Russian nation-state (which, of course, would carry implications of popular sovereignty). Furthermore, Russian tsars actually took pride in the multi-national character of their empire; at no time did they promulgate policies of systematic and thorough Russification of the entire population of their state.

In the past, some notable scholars have suggested that Alexander III and Nicholas II showed Russifying tendencies (Raeff 1971: 39; Conolly 1971: 152–3). However, more recent scholarship insists that the Russian government never followed policies of consistent Russification. Hugh Seton-Watson, for example, has argued that 'Russification in the literal sense of forcing non-Russians to become Russians existed primarily in the Ukraine, whose separate national character St. Petersburg officialdom absolutely

rejected, and in Poland.' He adds that 'In the Baltic provinces, the aim of Russification was to introduce Russian administrative practice and to make Russian the language of government; there was no serious attempt to force Germans to abandon their language and culture.' Neither did Russification occur in Finland, the Volga region or Central Asia (Seton-Watson 1986: 21, 22). Ronald Grigor Suny also agrees that 'Nationality was not a significant consideration for the Russian imperial state-builders' (Suny 1993: 25).

Theodore Weeks rejects the idea that 'the Russian state was guided by a coherent nationality policy that aimed at the total elimination of cultural and linguistic differences and at the conversion of Russia into a nation-state on the German or French model'. Indeed, he argues that 'the Russian Empire's "nationality policy" was far from modern nationalism: its primary goal was to preserve the unwieldy, utterly non-national empire, and only in second place to strengthen Russian culture.' Weeks concludes that 'the Russian Empire was not, and could not be, a nation-state. Any effort to make the Russian Empire into a national Russian state and was doomed to failure. More important, the ruling class of the Romanov Empire did not conceive of "their" state in those terms' (Weeks 1996: 3–4, 9, 12–13).

Hans Rogger also sees a fundamental contradiction between Russian national sentiment and the legitimation of the imperial state.

> The Russian experience in this regard is in sharp contrast with that of the West. There, the transition from the dynastic to the national state, the dissolution of old loyalties and allegiances had, by the nineteenth century, made nationalism a major factor of political loyalty and social integration.

However, in Russia, the state 'looked upon every autonomous expression of nationalism with fear and suspicion'. 'It was the state which kept itself apart from society, the state which time and again withdrew into a sphere of its own, jealously preserving its prerogatives, careful to keep all initiative in its own hands' (Rogger 1962: 225, 253, 254).

Most recently, in *Russia: Empire and People*, Geoffrey Hosking argues that Russian tsars after Alexander II did, in fact, follow Russifying policies (Hosking 1997: 367–97). He nevertheless stresses that this 'national imperialism' was not directed toward nurturing a Russian nation, but toward the preservation of the government through 'greater administrative unity and coordination' (Hosking 1997: 397). Moreover, the main point of Hosking's work is to tell the story of 'how the building of an empire impeded the formation of a nation' (Hosking 1997: xix).

It is notable that the Russian state kept at arm's length all individuals and groups that expressed Russian national sentimental or patriotic themes. Slavophiles, Pan-Slavs, Pochvenniks and others were all viewed by the tsar with great suspicion precisely because they implied that the purpose of the autocracy might serve the interests of Russia – rather than the other way around. The Russian autocracy could not accept any ideology that did not first and foremost serve the interests of the state.

However, Russian tsars need have felt no concern about Slavophile or Pan-Slav ideas. From none of the Russian patriotic quarters did any suggestion arise that the Russian empire should become a nation-state. Indeed, their philosophy stressed the profoundly Orthodox nature of the Russian nation and was fully consistent with the imperialist pretensions of the tsarist state. Because their discourse of national identity precisely defines the difference between Russia imperialism and modern European nationalism, however, I will discuss it below.

The one group of Russians who might be considered 'nationalists' were the narodniks – the revolutionary intelligentsia. In their desire to bring down the autocracy and to allow self-determination to the peasantry and in their support of Polish nationalism, the Russian populists took positions that would have been fully consistent with a nationalist standpoint. Because of their lack of interest in the future of a Russian state, however, they must be considered only 'proto-nationalists'.

Nor did Russian nationalism develop in the early twentieth century. Parties on the left put the interests of class over the interests of nation, parties on the right put the interests of empire over the interests of nation. The Russian Monarchist Party, the Nationalist Party, The Russian Assembly, the Union of the Russian People, were all quite the opposite of nationalists. They wanted to preserve not only the autocracy but the Great Russian empire: 'Russia one and indivisible' (Edelman 1980; Rawson 1995). Even Russian liberals (who one might expect would uphold the principles of secular nationalism and popular sovereignty) could not abandon the idea of a centralised Russian empire.

For example, despite Peter Struve's reputation as a 'national liberal', Richard Pipes reveals that he was really a staunch imperialist (Pipes 1980: 89, 169, 211, 209). Similarly, although Paul Miliukov was an outspoken opponent of Great Russian chauvinism and supported policies that would have granted some autonomy to the national minorities, nevertheless, Melissa Stockdale reveals that when the First World War broke out Miliukov proved to be an imperial statist at heart (Stockdale 1996: 189, 210, 218, 220).

The absence of nationalism as a cause of collapse

The collapse of the Russian empire in war and revolution can be directly attributed to the absence of nationalism in two ways: a political failure by the supporters of the Old Regime and the existence of fundamental social instability (another way of saying the absence of national unity).

To begin with, it is a commonplace of revolutionary historiography that the deepening of the revolution in the summer of 1917 was due to the stubborn insistence of the Provisional Government in pursuing the imperialist ambitions of the Russian empire in the First World War. William Rosenberg suggests that the Provisional Government might

conceivably have survived had it stressed the defence of Russia and not pursued the June offensive. He points out that Kadet support of the imperial state and not the Russian nation was fundamental to their policy. There was no political party – or even a single individual – calling for the Russian heartland to let go of its empire and to create a government of, by, and for Russians (Rosenberg 1973: 466).

These attitudes carried over to the civil war, in which the failure of the White Armies is, according to Rosenberg, largely attributable to their insistence on the inviolability of the Russian empire (Rosenberg 1973: 471; see also Kenez 1971: 219, 220; Conolly 1971: 153; Mawdsley 1987: 281; Brovkin 1994: 410; Procyk 1995). The obverse of the White's stubborn imperialism was Lenin's strategic appeal to national self-determination among the non-Russians of the empire. Richard Pipes and Evan Mawdsley credit the Bolsheviks' success to their nationality policy (Pipes 1964: 49, 29; Mawdsley 1987: 282). Lenin's call for national self-determination trumped the Whites' demand for the restoration of the empire.

This raises a point that deserves much closer examination. Most scholars view Lenin's appeal to national self-determination as a hypocritical strategy in his campaign to destroy the Russian empire (preparatory to creating a Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) (Pipes 1964; Connor 1984). On the other hand, Lenin's writings provide a powerful justification of national self-determination. Ivan Dzyuba, for example, makes much of them in his defence of Ukrainian nationalism (Dzyuba 1968). Furthermore, the notion of the Soviet Union as a union of sovereign national republics was Lenin's idea (Lewin 1968). Since the rise of nationalism within the Soviet Union has been widely considered to be the product of Lenin's nationalities policy, perhaps Lenin should really be considered Russia's first 'nationalist' – in function if not intention. (For discussions of how this occurred see Motyl 1990, Suny 1993, and Kaiser 1994.)

Moreover, the absence of nationalism can be seen as the principal symptom of the social instability that conditioned the collapse of the tsarist autocracy in the first place. After all, the scholarly consensus on the collapse of tsarism and the victory of Bolshevism can be summarised in the trite phrase that Russia 'failed to modernise'. To some this means that Russia failed to produce a parliamentary government and a democratic tradition that could have replaced an obsolete autocracy destined to collapse. To others it means that Russia was unable to meet the challenge of the First World War – giving rise to an anarchy that favoured the most radical political party. To yet others, it means that beneath the political and military failures of the Russian autocracy lay a highly fragmented and unstable society intractable to gradual, liberal reform. Nevertheless, implicit in all these accounts, as well as in general treatments of the last decades of tsarist rule, is the notion that a modern, cohesive civil society failed to develop in Russia (Haimson 1988; Rosenberg 1988; Rieber 1988). This view is also common in accounts of the failure of the Great Reforms (Lincoln

1990), of the failure of a middle class to solidify (Clowes *et al.* 1991), of the disintegration of the gentry (Manning 1982) and of the fragmentation of merchant and industrialist communities (Rieber 1982).

Yet no scholar has yet attributed the collapse of the autocracy specifically to the fact that it lacked the most salient characteristic of modern civil societies of the European type: nationalism. This should be surprising, since yet another trite expression holds that 'the nation-state is the agent of modernity'. After all, a key function of national identity in modern European states has been to create a sense of community among the population that transcends class interest and that imparts legitimacy to a state which represents itself as serving the interests of the nation. To say that Russian society was unstable and fragmented is simply another way of indicating that the citizenry of the Russian state did not experience a sense of Russian nationhood. It is precisely a sense of nationalism, therefore, that could have overcome Russia's social fragmentation in the early twentieth century.

This has been implied, though not elaborated, in recent scholarship. Although Leopold Haimson, in his influential analyses of Russian society, has not addressed the question of nation-state formation directly, he does make reference to lack of nationhood as the key to Russia's collapse. He suggests that a 'nation' was already in the making by the turn of the century, but the experiences of 1905 and 1917 showed

> the degree to which this notion of civil society had failed ... not only to bridge the divisions between rural and urban-commercial-industrial Russia, and between the upper and lower strata of both, but even to encompass the processes of economic, social, and psychological change actually experienced by various social groups.

Haimson points out that peasant soldiers lacked the 'very sense of nationhood, to which the Provisional Government sought to appeal in 1917', and that peasants in the Constituent Assembly appealed only to peasant deputies – and not to the 'Constituent Assembly as the institutional expression of the will of the nation, or even of the people, the *narod*' (Haimson 1988: 2, 12, 16). Most recently, Geoffrey Hosking has succinctly summarised the process of collapse thus:

> The Russian Empire fell apart in 1917 along fault-lines which were inherent in its situation as an empire with extensive vulnerable borders straddling Europe and Asia. For more than three centuries its structures had been those of a multi-ethnic service state, not those of an emerging nation. (Hosking 1997: 478)

Those 'fault-lines' were precisely the divisions that would have been resolved by the development of a national unity that is the basis for nationalism.

Imperial discourse as the impediment to nationalism

In order to answer the question of why Russia lacked a nationalist movement, one should begin with the question of what causes nationalism.

For if there are causes of nationalism, then the absence of one or another of those causes would be a sufficient explanation of why nationalism never appeared. Conversely, we can test theories of nationalism by applying them to a particular case. If a 'cause of nationalism' is present in a situation in which nationalism is absent, then it must not be a 'cause'. What is striking about Russia is that it seems that all the 'causes' that have been adduced to explain the appearance of nationalism to the west of Russia were in fact also present in Russia. Thus, the fact that Russia never experienced nationalism must cast doubt on previously proposed theories of the origins of nationalism.

Those who might be called 'idealists' treat nationalism as a doctrine that was created by certain great thinkers during the late Enlightenment and early Romantic period. Carlton J. H. Hayes (1950), for example, recognised that modern industrial society has provided the economic and social context within which nationalism has grown, but he nevertheless stressed that nationalism is essentially an intellectual doctrine – produced by an educated, political elite. Elie Kedourie considered the doctrine of nationalism to be the logical consequence of Kant's notion of individual autonomy (Kedourie 1993). Most recently, Liah Greenfeld (1992) has interpreted nationalism as a product of elite *ressentiment* and search for social identity.

Yet Russia possessed an intellectual elite that was as passionately patriotic and nationally sentimental as any in Europe. Hans Rogger (1960) has demonstrated the extreme sensitivity to national issues of educated Russians in the eighteenth century. Nicholas Riasanovsky (1965) makes explicit the connection between the Romantic movement and nationalism in Europe and national sentiment in Russia. Liah Greenfeld (1992) is the most recent scholar to examine Russian national self-consciousness, yet what she is describing, despite the title of her book, is not nationalism at all (according to Gellner's definition), but simply 'the related phenomena of national identity (or nationality) and consciousness, and collectivities based on them – nations ...' (1992: 3). She therefore ignores the key political demand that is the essence of nationalism.

'Historical sociologists' agree that nationalism is a product of an elite, but they focus not on the intellectual but the political needs of the elite. They consider the cultivation of national loyalties among the population of their territory as a practical solution to the question of building political loyalty to a new sort of state (Tilly 1975; Hinsley 1973: 33–4). Some, like Charles Tilly and Joseph Strayer, consider the development of nationalism to be an almost unconscious activity in which a state and a society accommodate one another (Tilly 1975; Strayer 1971: 346–7.) Others, such as Eric Hobsbawm, hold that national traditions can be created by a political elite that uses nationalism to manipulate public sentiment (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Hobsbawm 1990).

Russia, however, experienced the same sorts of pressures as the rest of Europe: warfare among sovereign territorial states in an international state-

system, the rise of new social classes, the self-perceived need to justify the legitimacy of the government and to secure the loyalty of its population. Russian tsars, at least from the time of Nicholas I, even used themes of Russian national consciousness to support their legitimacy. But, as I have already shown, the particular and defining political demand of nationalism was striking by its absence.

Nationalism can also be seen as the product of certain structural features of modern industrial society. 'Structuralists' do not consider the modern nation-state to be the conscious work of a political elite but the product of basic structural forces of which both state-building and nationalism are mere symptoms. Karl Deutsch (1953), for example, represents nationalism as a phenomenon that proceeds from objective social processes – specifically the sort of social communication associated with the modern industrial, free enterprise economy. Ernest Gellner (1983) argues that nationalism originates in industrial-style permanent change and growth and is rooted in a complex and persistently changing division of labour. Benedict Anderson (1983) stresses the role of print capitalism in creating 'imagined communities'.

It is this explanation of nationalism that might seem to be best substantiated by Russia's failure to develop a nationalist movement; perhaps Russian nationalism never developed because Russia was 'economically backward'. However, by the early twentieth century Russia was hardly less modern in terms of urbanisation, education and industrialisation than England in 1688, Italy in 1861 or Ireland in the late nineteenth century. More importantly, Russia was modern enough to experience a working-class revolution in 1917. The collapse of tsarism in that year is not attributable to a 'failure to modernise' but to a failure to accommodate the stresses of modernisation – precisely the function that nationalism might have performed.

A profoundly different view is taken by a school of nationalism studies that considers nationalism to be a 'real' rather than a constructed movement. These scholars do not deny that modernity might have something to do with the forms that national identity takes, nor do they deny that political elites can manipulate it. They assert, however, that nationalism cannot be arbitrarily invented – nationalism succeeds only when it appeals to a human group with shared myths, legends, symbols, history, homeland and feeling of community belonging (Armstrong 1982; Smith 1986; Connor 1994). In other words, nationalism can be powerful only where there is an authentic nation.

It would seem that this explanation is profoundly contradicted by the example of Russia. The existence of a real Russian *ethnie* – if not a nation – is indisputable. Russians shared a common culture, myths, symbols, language and sense of history. Russians also inhabited an unequivocally historic homeland – a central tenet of nationalism (Smith 1986: 163; 1991: 9). Yet Russian nationalism failed to appear. These 'realists' may be correct in suggesting that nationalism cannot exist without real nations, but the

case of Russia suggests that 'real nations' are not enough. There apparently also must be elites who desire to appeal to and manipulate national sentiments. This was no doubt a nation (or a proto-nation) to which political elites could have appealed, but no actual or potential political leaders chose to appeal to it.

The failures of each of these theories of nationalism to explain Russia's lack of nationalism all point to one crucial element: the inability of Russia's intellectual and political elite to conceptualise and enunciate nationalist demands. This suggests a fundament cultural and intellectual restraint upon the ability of educated Russians to think about politics. I would argue that Russian nationalism was excluded by a traditional political discourse which conceived of the world in universalist, religious categories of thought. The particularism and secularism of nationalism were incomprehensible to the Russian elite.

Since an empire is a state that administers a number of different nations, the Russian empire could not follow a programme of nationalism (even of Russian nationalism) without undermining its own existence. A state that rules a number of peoples must represent itself as upholding universal values or laws that apply to all human beings. In other words, an empire posits a universal humanity that has precedence over any other sort of national or regional identity. The language of nation, on the contrary, holds that there are no universal human values and that a human's most essential nature is in his or her membership in a nation. Even when an empire identifies itself with a people, the characteristics of that people cannot be relative and self-entered; that people must be portrayed as the bearers of a universal message or civilisation.

In accordance with these principles, Russian tsars were careful to develop a universalist and religious legitimising ideology fully consistent with the imperial nature of their state. Even though they employed Russian national themes, they never appealed to Russian nationalism. That is, they never represented themselves as ruling in the interests of the Russian people. Ladis Kristof, for example, has stressed the sharp dichotomy between the (*russkii*) people and the (*rossiiskii*) state. He argues that the integration of the Russian empire under the rule of the tsar would not aim at Russification but at '"Rossification" – the development of an unswerving loyalty and direct attachment to the person of the tsar, by God's will the sole-power-holder (*samoderzhets*) and head of *the* Church'. Furthermore, '"Rossification" was permeated not so much by ways and things specifically Russian as by the spirit of the Orthodox Church.' Indeed, 'The Orthodox idea, not the Russian tongue or civilization, was the *spiritus movens* of the tsardom. Russia was first of all Holy, not Russian.' 'On the spiritual level, [the state-idea] appealed to a supernatural authority and to ideas panhuman in scope' (Kristof 1967: 244, 245, 246, 248–9).

Nicholas Riasanovsky further supports the view that, under Nicholas I, 'official nationality' served mainly as propaganda to support the power of

the emperor and not the interests of the people. 'Even pithy, legal formulations of autocracy usually included two items: the absolute nature of imperial power and the link between the emperor and God. For, in the last analysis, God provided the foundation for the authority of the tsar' (Riasanovsky 1959: 124, 96–7). As Richard Wortman puts it, the Russian autocrat had to represent Russia as the bearer of an universal, rather than a particular idea. 'For Nicholas, there was no contradiction between national and universal; he saw the Russian monarchy as the heir to the universal imperial tradition that he defended against the Turks.' He used Russian Orthodoxy to make 'the Russian emperor heir to the imperial heritage of Christendom' (Wortman 1995: 385). Such an ideology logically ruled out nationalism.

Furthermore, because the Russian educated elite followed the tsar in identifying the Russian people with a universal religion, they also were never able to produce the sort of particularistic and secular nationalist ideology that arose in Western Europe. It is true that there are many similarities between the first generation of Slavophiles and the pioneer romantic nationalists in Western Europe. In the words of Nicholas Riasanovsky, 'The nationalist analyses of Russia usually conformed to the romantic pattern and emphasized the particular spiritual principles of the nation, the providential meaning of its history, and the peculiar nature of its spirit as revealed in its language and institutions' (1965: 3). Edward Thaden also places the Slavophiles in the context of the general romantic, nationalist movement in Europe: 'the story of the genesis of romantic nationalism in Russia is, to a large extent, one of overcoming the cosmopolitanism and rationalism of the Enlightenment' (1954: 503). However, none of the so-called Russian 'nationalists' – from Slavophiles to Pan-Slavs to Pochvenniks to Black Hundreds – ever proposed a government of, by, and for Russians. They continued to believe in the importance of the tsar and in the idea of empire. Most of important of all, by identifying Russianness with the values of the Orthodox Church rather than the interests of the people, these thinkers created an ideology that was incapable of supporting modern nationalism.

Indeed, for ideologists of Russian national sentiment, the interests and well-being of the Russian people was not an issue. Russians were not important in themselves, but because they were considered to be the bearers of a holy and a universal idea. It was their duty to lead – and perhaps to sacrifice themselves for – others. As Riasanovsky says, 'The appeal to Orthodoxy was the making of Slavophilism. In Orthodoxy the Slavophiles found Russian tradition, the binding element of Russian state and society, the basic inspiration of Russian culture, the meaning and the mission of Russia.' Furthermore,

> The Slavophiles felt certain that their mission, the mission of Russia, was of universal significance, and was bound to save the whole world. They buttressed their

theory by identifying Russia with Orthodoxy, and by proclaiming that it was the historical destiny of Russia to create a new society based on the true principles of faith. The message was obviously of a universal import, and the Slavophiles were careful to describe the national and all the other interests as subordinate to the religious principles. (Riasanovsky 1965: 173, 180–1)

The same attitudes appear among other ideologists of Russian sentiment. For example, Michael Cherniavsky has quoted Dostoevsky's assertion that, 'The Russian soul, the genius of the Russian people is perhaps the most capable among all other peoples to fulfill in itself the idea of universal union and brotherhood' (Cherniavsky 1958: 634). And of Dostoevsky, Riasanovsky says that

his doctrine of Russian Messiahship was essentially a continuation of the Slavophile attempt to reconcile the universal and the national element through an appeal to the special spiritual gifts of the Russian people, Russian spirit, 'Russian Christ': Dostoevskii stressed in particular the all-inclusive nature of the Russians, which enabled them to understand, help, and lead all the nations of the world. (1965: 206–7)

In his study of popular literature in the late imperial period, Jeffrey Brooks finds similar imperialist attitudes among the general literate and semi-literate population of Russia.

The most humble Great Russian was invited to think of himself as generously assisting the smaller and culturally backward nationalities that comprised the empire. This provided a sense of pride and status congruent psychologically with the other changes that were part of the greater geographic and economic mobility of common Great Russians at the end of the nineteenth century. This sense of nationality was also one that could survive the collapse of the autocracy and motivate Great Russians to fight to maintain the empire during the chaos of revolution and civil war. (Brooks 1985: 245)

Thus educated Russia's particular sense of national identity contributed not the creation of a nation-state, but to the maintenance of an empire.

Russian nationalism in the Soviet period

The transformation of the Russian empire into the Soviet Union did not solve the social and political dilemmas that resulted from the lack of Russian nationalism. Indeed, the Soviet leaders did not break out of the boundaries imposed by the discourse of empire and merely recast the Russian empire's old universalist and religious categories of thought in the equally universalist language of international socialism. The parallels that have been drawn between communism and Russian nationalism (as Russian imperialism has been improperly termed) suggest that the rulers of the Soviet state continued the outmoded political thinking of the tsarist past (Barghoorn 1956; Ulam 1981; Besancon 1986).

Furthermore, the justification of the Soviet state was never the well-being of its citizens, but the victory of communism. Soviet citizens were asked to sacrifice themselves for an ideal more noble than their own national self-interest. Indeed, the same sort of tension is apparent between 'Soviet' and 'Russian' that Kristof found between 'Rossiiskii' and 'Russkii'. The 'Soviet' Communist Party was dominated by Russians, but it did not serve the interests of Russians. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn has emphasised the fact that the interests of Russia were sacrificed to the interests of empire by both tsars and communists (Solzhenitsyn 1995).

One can further argue that the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 for precisely the same reason that the Russian empire collapsed in 1917, i.e. Soviet society lacked a cohesive sense of nationhood. It must be kept in mind that the Soviet Union did not collapse because 'communism failed'. The end of an empire and the end of an economic/political system are two categorically different phenomena. The transition from a totalitarian to a more open and democratic society was a process that could have taken place across the entire expanse of the Soviet polity, and this process had, in fact, largely taken place by the summer of 1991.

To mention a few momentous changes: in 1986–7 political prisoners were freed and censorship of the press ended, in 1989 *The Gulag Archipelago* was published in the Soviet Union for the first time, in 1989 the Communist Party instituted elections with secret ballots and multiple candidates and the first independent political parties were formed, in 1990 the Communist Party renounced its 'leading role' in governing the country. By the summer of 1991, even before it collapsed, it would have been impossible to describe the Soviet Union as 'totalitarian'. Indeed there was good reason for Moshe Lewin to have concluded a full year earlier that the Soviet Union had become a modern 'civil society' (1991: 159–60). Long before the Soviet Union was dissolved, its political system had already progressed a long way toward being an open, pluralistic, parliamentary democracy. What failed in 1991 was the primacy of Soviet identity over national identity. The dissolution of the USSR into independent republics was a nationalist event in its essence: an empire dissolved as nations and states became congruent.

Furthermore, the most notable – indeed the seemingly crucial – occurrence was the appearance, for the first time in history, of Russian nationalism. Separatist movements among nations on the periphery of the Soviet empire were nothing new. The Soviet Union, moreover, could probably have survived the secession of the Baltic, the Caucasian or the Central Asian republics. What the Soviet Union could not survive, however, was the loss of the Russian Republic. This was amply proven by Boris Yeltsin, the first leader of Russia to abandon the language of empire in favour of the discourse of nationalism. Beginning in his campaign for election to the RSFSR in the spring of 1990, Yeltsin 'played the Russian card' adroitly.

Yeltsin depicted Russia not as the heart of a great empire but as a nation belittled and demeaned by an alien empire. He pointed out, for example,

that Russia had never had its own communist party and did not have a delegate to the United Nations, and he called for the creation of a Russian (as opposed to Soviet) academy of sciences, a news service and even Russian radio and TV programming. After his election he was instrumental in Russia's declaration of sovereignty and announcement that Russian laws would have precedence over Soviet laws. And, of course, Yeltsin was chiefly responsible for organising the meeting in Minsk at which Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus agreed to disband the USSR and replace it with a Commonwealth of Independent States. The CIS would be composed, significantly, of the elected heads of the governments of the sovereign 'independent states'. In demanding that Russia be a sovereign state, Yeltsin is, according to the accepted definition of the word, a nationalist. (This story has been told many times. One of the first and most perceptive is Dunlop 1993, although Dunlop, while referring to Yeltsin as 'playing the Russian card' does not call him a nationalist.)

Although Yeltsin was the first Russian political leader to advocate Russian nationalism, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn was the first Russian intellectual to call for the disbanding of the Soviet Empire and the creation of a Russia of, by, and for Russians (Solzhenitsyn 1991; Rowley 1997).

Conclusion: nationalism and political discourse

Nevertheless, despite the fact that Yeltsin demanded the congruency of nation and state for Russia, scholars are still reluctant to attribute the dissolution of the Soviet Union to 'nationalism'. Instead, the consensus holds that republican demands for independence were a mere symptom of weakness at the centre. Martin Malia, for example, argues that the nationalities revolted against the centre only after the economy declined and when the regime lost the will to coerce (Malia 1994: 492–3). Malia asserts that 'despite the recurrent appearance of national cultural protest, this multinational empire remained stable as long as the economy was able to support a strong central state' (Malia 1994: 440). Johann Arnason also insists that 'the fact that the nation-state has become the main beneficiary of the demise of the Soviet model should not lead us to mistake it for the historical subject of the transformation'. The real causes, he avers, were decline at the centre and Gorbachev's mistakes (Arnason 1993: 212). Brendan Kiernan recognises that it was independence movements among the republics that really tore the Union apart – but he attributes this to a contradiction within Gorbachev's electoral politics (Kiernan 1993: 2). Philip Roeder considers the rise of the republics to be a by-product of the political struggles at the centre. 'The reformers pressed for decentralization and institutional changes to strengthen reformist leaders within the republics in their confrontation with the centre. In many republics this meant creating republic presidents who could exercise strong executive powers in the

confrontation with the iron triangle' (Roeder 1993: 240). Leslie Holmes also considers national liberation (by the nations of Eastern Europe as well as the republics of the former Soviet Union) to be more a reaction to political and economic failure on the part of the centre than an authentic demand for independence (Holmes 1993: xi) Walter Laqueur argues both that national separatism would not have occurred if there had been an authentic civil society and that the republics were strong only because the centre was weak (Laqueur 1994: 161).

Perhaps this is understandable among scholars whose subject at hand is not nationalism but communism, yet scholars who focus on nationalism come to similar conclusions. Alexander Motyl attributes national separatism to political elites whose resistance to the centre was an unintended by-product of the Soviet constitution. Motyl denies that a civil society existed and reinforces the idea that communism collapsed due to an inner contradiction. Motyl treats the demands for sovereignty as a political strategy of the republican leaders to enhance their power – and not as a reflection of the demands of their national constituencies (Motyl 1990: 157). He also contributes to the argument that it was weakness at the centre rather than strength at the periphery that led to the collapse (*ibid.*: 188). Ronald G. Suny agrees with Motyl that national separatism was the work of republic elites in pursuit of their own interests. 'In most republics, nationalism was accompanied by a desperate grasp for local power by entrenched native elites.' Indeed, Suny characterises these elites as essentially 'national "mafias," centred within the Communist parties and state apparatuses, whose reach extended throughout society', who ruled through corrupt patronage (Suny 1993: 156, 118). Suny further argues that the triumph of national separatism was the result and not the cause of the political crisis at the centre (*ibid.*: 126). Ben Fowkes is the only scholar to assert that 'What set off the coup of 19 August 1991 was not the social and economic crisis currently shaking the Soviet Union, severe though it was, but the crisis of the multinational state.' Nevertheless, he also attributes the collapse to problems in the central government. Indeed, 'The greatest role in the disintegration of the Soviet Union was played by Gorbachev himself' (Fowkes 1997: 196).

What all these scholars seem to find problematic is the absence of the 'causes' that are usually adduced for the rise of nationalism: all accounts specifically reject the role of a cultural, nationalist elite, the presence of a modern civil society, or the grass-roots upsurge of a 'real' nationalist movement. Instead, they attribute the movements of independence by the republics to local political elites who are able to enhance their own power because the centre became weak. The sole exception is Donald Kaiser who argues that

> the Soviet federation, in providing concrete form to the nationalistic imagery of an intimate connectivity between blood and soil and, perhaps more important, in

providing a political geographic structure through which indigenes could act on their 'sense of exclusiveness,' itself served as a catalyst in the activation of national territoriality. Far from a transitory mechanism for resolving the national question, Soviet federalism became a means through which indigenous elites fulfilled their own national-territorial agendas. (Kaiser 1994: 329)

However, the thrust of this paper has been that the generally accepted 'causes' of nationalism are really nothing more than preconditions. What *really* 'causes' nationalism is the discourse of particularism and secularism that provides a legitimating vocabulary to those who seek to rule a sovereign, territorially bounded state in opposition to an imperial rival. The idea of a 'nation' is particularly attractive to such a discourse of legitimation, since nations are by definition secular, particular, relativist and 'natural.'

Where those nations come from is irrelevant. There may be a fundamental human instinct to form into groups that defend their territory. One's attachment to one's literate culture may be heightened by industrial society. Being a member of a human community that has a long history of sharing the same language, culture and homeland may also cause a sense of national belonging. Reading newspapers or receiving a public education may be sufficient to instill the sense of community – whether 'imagined' or 'invented'. But the only reason any of these has political importance is because they can be mobilised by those who speak the discourse of modernity. In other words, the discourse of the nation-state imposes intense selective pressure on nations. If suitable nations do not exist 'naturally', states find it necessary to invent them.

Boris Yeltsin did not have to invent the Russian nation. He did, however, have to overcome a deeply imbedded tradition of imperialist discourse. Nor can we assume that Russian nationalism is finally triumphant. Russian nationalist discourse is not uncontested. The old universal and religious vocabulary of tsars and Slavophiles has not yet disappeared. The notorious expressions of Russian imperialism by Vladimir Zhirinovsky and Gennadii Ziuganov are most well known, but there is also a widespread literature on Russian national consciousness that stresses Russia's universal/religious mission to serve and protect other peoples (Kukushkin 1993; Troitskii 1994, 1995; Kas'ianova 1994. See also the discussion of the poet Valerii Khatiushin in Rowley 1997).

Geoffrey Hosking has recently spelled out in the pages of this journal four choices that now face the Russian Federation: to pursue Russia's traditional imperial mission, to integrate with other Eastern Slavs, to stand for all Russian-speakers, or 'to regard the Russian nation as consisting of all the citizens of the Russian Federation (Hosking 1998: 456–7). A combination of Hosking's second and fourth points would most closely resemble European-style nation-state building. Indeed, they are precisely the goals set by the most explicit and consistent ideological exponent of Russian nationalism, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. In the event that Russia cannot form

a union with Ukraine and Belarus, Solzhenitsyn proposes that Russia's borders be redrawn to incorporate Russian-speaking populations (Solzhenitsyn 1991: 18–19; 1995: 94). Furthermore, despite Solzhenitsyn's concern for the cultural autonomy of ethnic minorities, his fervent call for the rejuvenation of the Russian nation (1995) is just the sort of programme than underlay the activity of western European nation-state building in the nineteenth century on the basis of a homogenous 'national' culture.

One of the most fateful developments in Russian history is now taking place. Whether the Russian Federation follows the ideology of Russian imperialism or the ideology of Russian nationalism will have far-reaching implications for peace in north central Asia and for the stability of the Russian Federation. Once begun, the rise of the nationalist discourse of particularism and secularism proved irresistible in the European nations to Russia's west. It will be of great interest to see whether Russia follows the European model or continues to be a special case.

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